

Introductory Statement for Felice Gaer

USCIRF/Wilson Center Event on Turkey

February 26, 2007

Good afternoon. I'd like to welcome you all to the Wilson Center this afternoon for a discussion of some very interesting poll findings on Turkish attitudes toward religion and politics by an important Turkish think tank, the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, or TESEV. Our discussion today is being jointly sponsored by the Commission and the Southeast Europe Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The Commission would like to thank the Southeast Europe Project for assisting us in holding this event, in particular Dr. Henri Barkey, who is Professor of International Relations at Lehigh University and currently a public policy scholar at the Wilson Center, and also Ms. Andri Peros, who has done much of the key legwork needed to put on such an event.

I would like to give you a brief introduction about the Commission and then I will turn the floor over to my fellow Commissioner, Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou, who will tell you about the Commission's interest in Turkey, our recent visit there, and how this event evolved from that visit.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is a federal U.S. government agency mandated to monitor religious freedom conditions abroad and to report to the President, the Secretary of State, and the Congress. As part of our reporting mandate, we are required to make recommendations to the U.S. government on how the promotion of religious freedom can more effectively be made an integral part of our foreign policy apparatus. The Commission was established as a result of the passage in 1998 of the International Religious Freedom Act, which, in addition to the Commission, mandated the establishment of the International Religious Freedom Office in the U.S. State Department, which is tasked with ensuring that the right to thought, conscience, and religion or belief around the world garners the same kind of

attention as arms, trade and other policies and interests.

Although the Commission sometimes works together with the State Department, the Commission was established also to work as a kind of “watchdog” over that agency, to comment on-and to critique, when necessary-U.S. government actions and policies that affect the advancement of religious freedom and related human rights.

The Commission is made up of private individuals who are appointed by the White House and congressional leaders and who hail from various walks of life, with backgrounds in law, U.S. foreign policy, human rights, and religious affairs. We are bipartisan; five commissioners are appointed by the president's party, and four are appointed by the opposing party. All of us volunteer our time.

The Commission addresses the issue of freedom of religion or belief in a wide variety of countries, including those where the government is a severe violator of this right, as well as countries which, though not necessarily experiencing serious religious freedom problems, are strategically influential or important to U.S. policy. For example, in the past year, the Commission traveled on fact-finding visits to Russia, Turkey, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, each of which illustrates different religious freedom concerns.

Before turning to my colleague, I would like to emphasize that the Commission's work-and indeed, the standards explicit in the IRFA legislation-are not based on U.S. laws or practices with regard to freedom of religion or religion-state relations. Rather, the Commission is mandated by law to use as its standards those international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, in which the right to the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is affirmed.

With that brief introduction, I now turn to Dr. Prodromou, who will tell you something about the Commission's interest in Turkey.